

All 4 Gospels describe the events of this day. For Mark and Matthew, this is fulfillment of Jewish Scripture of the Prophets, so the Donkey is important. For Luke writing to Gentile Christians like us, the Messiah is a Warrior riding into Battle on a Stallion. John is different, having the luxury of distance from the events in time, JOHN is telling a highly SYMBOLIC STORY with every element carefully placed to point to the RESURRECTION. That is the struggle of the GOSPELS is we know the ending, we know where this leads.

A radical change has been taking place across Christianity over the last decade, all based on expediency! Across many Protestant Churches, prior to Vatican II 1962-65, we celebrated Palm Sunday with Hosannas, we celebrated Easter with Alleluias, with nothing in between. The significance of this was captured in the Broadway Musical "The Wiz" by singing "DON'T NOBODY BRING ME NO BAD NEWS!" We never focused on Jesus being betrayed, or about Jesus' suffering, death, burial. We had Wednesday Evening potlucks throughout LENT, that were for sharing Casseroles, Jello and Disney films...

Then Protestant Churches began recognizing Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Paschal Saturday and Easter Sunrise. 50 years later, Churches recognized how difficult it is for Northerners to attend Midweek Evening Worship, so amalgamated everything together, making this PASSION SUNDAY instead.

Especially in John's Gospel, the readings of this day set-up the escalating anxiety that crescendos at the Last Supper, Crucifixion, Resurrection.

When we were very little, my brothers and I spent mornings before school watching reruns of THE LONE RANGER. Invariably Tonto would be sent to town, and in town this hero, would be beaten up and locked in Jail, such that we would scream at the television set "DON'T GO TO TOWN TONTO, DON'T GO!" That is the mood of Jesus going to Jerusalem for Passover. DON'T GO TO PASSOVER JESUS!

This story is told in all 4 Gospels, yet JOHN is different. Everything foreshadows connections between Lazarus being brought back from the dead, Dinner with Jesus' closest friends, plots to arrest Jesus have him put to death, AND PASSOVER. According to JOHN this was Jesus' 3rd Passover at Jerusalem.

HERE All of the verbs at the beginning of this story are Legal terms: The Chief Priests & Pharisees 1.GAVE ORDERS, 2.anyone who knew about them SHOULD CONFESS, that 3.THEY MIGHT ARREST THEM.

Because the story is long and well known, we did not read of Jesus raising LAZARUS from the dead. Jesus gave the disciples word that Lazarus died. Do we know why? Does Jesus rush to be with his friend? No, Death is a solitary activity. Over the decades, I have been with a lot of individuals as they passed over... Often it is a beautiful holy occasion, yet far more frequently than not, the person will wait until after a family birthday passes, after family leave the room, when your back is turned, rather than the death scenes of theater. When Lazarus did die, 4 days pass, before Jesus arrives. Mary is in the house and Martha accuses, "IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE YOU COULD HAVE SAVED HIM!" Death is a Natural Occurrence. Blindness, Deafness, Being Lame, Leprosy, all of these are hardships that Jesus cured, but DEATH Jesus does not stop, foreshadowing HE WILL NOT STOP EVEN HIS OWN DEATH. BECAUSE Death is not the end.

Everyone is anxiously wondering amid the death threats and anxiety, if Jesus will come to Jerusalem for Passover. And Jesus goes to a dinner. According to JOHN's Gospel this is the only occasion where the word "Dinner" is used other than for the Last Supper, so there is an important connection here. The various translations seem to disagree if this was at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, or if they were present at the home of Simon who was called SIMON THE LEPER because Jesus had healed him of Leprosy. What seems more important is the location was at BETHANY and BETHPHAGE which were small towns outside the City of Jerusalem. Just as "Bethlehem" in Hebrew meant HOUSE of BREAD, BETHANY & BETHPHAGE refer to HOUSE OF FIGS, connected with the first morning after Jesus enters Jerusalem when he goes seeking FIGS (normal for the place called House of Figs) and Jerusalem and the TREE is BARREN.

Think about the sensory experience of this story... MARTHA is serving dinner with all of the wonderful smells of middle eastern cooking. Lazarus is an honored guest there, yet LAZARUS was dead in the grave 4 Days. How does a DEAD body smell after 4 days in the tomb? And MARY has been saving an alabaster jar filled with a pound of costly ointment, estimates are that this cost the equivalent of 300 days wages so a Year's Salary! Different from the other Gospels, MARY anoints Jesus' FEET with the perfume and wipes them with her hair. This is sensual. At the same time, at the LAST SUPPER Jesus will be the one washing the feet of all of the Disciples; and Easter morning the women will bring perfumes and oils to the Grave. There is an underscoring of how dangerous and how foolish the Chief Priests are, because in addition to plotting to kill Jesus they want to kill LAZARUS who has already been dead! Different from Orthodox understanding the 1st Disciple, who without being instructed knows to act in LOVE, is a woman, MARY.

In the Synoptic Gospels, there are involved stories about Jesus sending two of the Disciples to fetch something to carry him, in one a Donkey, in another a Colt, in the 3rd a Donkey and a Colt. Among all the stories of the Disciples, how would you like to be remembered as 1 of the 2 who were DONKEY FETCHERS? This takes up half of Mark's story of Palm Sunday! In John, Jesus was WALKING to Jerusalem when confronted by the Crowd who want to proclaim him a KING. So Jesus gets his own Donkey to ride on! NOT a Stallion, not a CONVERTIBLE Electric Vehicle. Jesus himself gets a Donkey, fulfilling the Old Testament book of Zechariah, that the MESSIAH will not be like a WARRIOR or KING in a CHARIOT, but humble, riding on a donkey the Symbol for Justice and Righteousness.

That is the way of faith isn't it? When we first claimed our faith, we had glorious ideals of THIS IS THE DAY THE LORD HATH MADE! We are chosen to be a DEACON, an ELDER, to SING SOLOS in the CHOIR! When in reality, a lot of Church work is offering a suggestion at a Committee meeting; Calling on someone you do not know or who has been in the hospital; offering an extra gift to help pay for the clogged RESTROOMS! Whether Jesus himself, or two unnamed Disciples, there is a lot of DONKEY FETCHING, not to be confused with HORSE THIEVES.

In each of the other GOSPELS there are different descriptions about the entry. Some describe taking off their cloaks to put on the Colt or on the Road like a Carpet; some that they took branches off the Trees. JOHN remembers our LITANY this morning from Psalm 118: That GOD has opened for you the GATES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and we are to bind up the ALTAR with Palm Branches. The Palm branch has a unique symbolism in Ancient Israel. During the time of the MACCABEES, which was a JEWISH REVOLT AGAINST the ROMAN LEGION, the Israelites minted coins with a Palm Branch on it, because we are to be like the PALM BRANCH which yields and bends rather than violence and armed resistance. In retaliation, the Romans minted their own coin with a broken Palm Branch of what they were going to do.

So the remaining element in this story, this story which begins the whole of HOLY WEEK LEADING TO EASTER, is the word "HOSANNA". It is not a familiar word, even in the Church. We say AMEN every week, sometimes even in daily life. On occasion we say ALLELUIA, as if to cry out EUREKA! But HOSANNA? I am willing to bet the last time any of us said "HOSANNA" was last year on Palm Sunday. What it means is "SAVE US, SON OF DAVID, SAVE US!" But SAVE US from WHAT? From HELL? That seems like a fairly expected answer. Save us from DEATH? But Jesus did not save himself or even LAZARUS from DYING. Save us from FEAR? Save us from acting like we have when we were without GOD, without Faith? I think we are getting closer. Maybe we need to go through this week, to figure out what we really need and want to be SAVED FROM, in order to share GOD'S PASSOVER, be RESURRECTED EASTER MORNING. HOSANNA!